

Joseph Brodsky

*The Condition We
Call "Exile"*

As we gather here, in this attractive and well-lit room, on this cold December evening, to discuss the plight of the writer in exile, let us pause for a minute and think of some of those who, quite naturally, didn't make it to this room. Let us imagine, for instance, Turkish *Gastarbeiter*s prowling the streets of West Germany, uncomprehending or envious of the surrounding reality. Or let us imagine Vietnamese boat people bobbing on high seas or already settled somewhere in the Australian outback. Let us imagine Mexican wetbacks crawling the ravines of southern California, past the border controls into the territory of the United States. Or let us imagine shiploads of Pakistanis disembarking somewhere in Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, hungry for menial jobs the oil-rich locals won't do. Let us imagine multitudes of Ethiopians trekking some desert on foot into Somalia (or is it the other way around?), escaping the famine. Well, we may stop here because that minute of imagining has already passed, although a lot could be added to this list. Nobody has ever counted these people and nobody, including the UN relief organizations, ever will: coming in millions, they elude computation and constitute what is called—for want of a better term or a higher degree of compassion—migration.

Whatever the proper name for this phenomenon is, whatever the motives, origins, and destinations of these people are, whatever their impact on the societies which they abandon and to which they come,

one thing is absolutely clear: they make it very difficult to talk with a straight face about the plight of the writer in exile.

Yet talk we must, and not only because literature, like poverty, is known for taking care of its own kind, but more because of the ancient and perhaps as yet unfounded belief that, were the masters of this world better read, the mismanagement and grief that makes millions hit the road could be somewhat reduced. Since there is not much on which to rest our hopes for a better world, and since everything else seems to fail one way or another, we must somehow maintain that literature is the only form of moral insurance that a society has; that it is the permanent antidote to the dog-eat-dog principle; that it provides the best argument against any sort of bulldozer-type mass solution—if only because human diversity is literature's lock and stock, as well as its *raison d'être*. We must talk because we must insist that literature is the greatest—surely greater than any creed—teacher of human subtlety, and that by interfering with literature's natural existence and with people's ability to learn literature's lessons, a society reduces its own potential, slows down the pace of its evolution, ultimately, perhaps, puts its own fabric in peril. If this means that we must talk to ourselves, so much the better: not for ourselves but perhaps for literature.

Whether he likes it or not, *Gastarbeiter*s and refugees of any stripe effectively pluck the orchid out of an exiled writer's lapel. Displacement and misplacement are this century's commonplace. And what our exiled writer has in common with a *Gastarbeiter* or a political refugee is that in either case a man is running away from the worse toward the better. The truth of the matter is that from a tyranny one can be exiled only to a democracy. For good old exile ain't what it used to be. It isn't leaving civilized Rome for savage Sarmatia anymore, nor is it sending a man from, say, Bulgaria to China. No, as a rule what takes place is a transition from a political and economic backwater to an industrially advanced society with the latest word on individual liberty on its lips. And it must be added that perhaps taking this route is for an exiled writer, in many ways, like going home—because he gets closer to the seat of the ideals which inspired him all along.

If one were to assign the life of an exiled writer a genre, it would have to be tragicomedy. Because of his previous incarnation, he is

capable of appreciating the social and material advantages of democracy far more intensely than its natives do. Yet for precisely the same reason (whose main by-product is the linguistic barrier), he finds himself totally unable to play any meaningful role in his new society. The democracy into which he has arrived provides him with physical safety but renders him socially insignificant. And the lack of significance is what no writer, exile or not, can take.

For it is the quest for significance that very often constitutes the rest of his career. To say the least, it is very often a literary career's consequence. In the case of the exiled writer, it is almost invariably the cause of his exile. And one is terribly tempted to add here that the existence of this desire in a writer is a conditioned response on his part to the vertical structure of his original society. (For a writer living in a free society, the presence of this desire bespeaks the atavistic memory every democracy has of its unconstitutional past.)

In this respect, the plight of an exiled writer is indeed much worse than that of a *Gastarbeiter* or the average refugee. His appetite for recognition makes him restless and oblivious to the superiority of his income as a college teacher, lecturer, small magazine editor or just a contributor—for these are the most frequent occupations of exiled authors nowadays—over the wages of somebody doing menial work. That is, our man is a little bit corrupt, almost by definition. But then the sight of a writer rejoicing in insignificance, in being left alone, in anonymity is about as rare as that of a cockatoo at the Polar Circle, even under the best possible circumstances. Among exiled writers, this attitude is almost totally absent. At least, it is absent in this room. Understandably so, of course, but saddening nonetheless.

It is saddening because if there is anything good about exile, it is that it teaches one humility. One can even take it a step further and suggest that the exile's is the ultimate lesson in that virtue. And that it is especially priceless for a writer because it gives him the longest possible perspective. "And thou art far in humanity," as Keats said. To be lost in mankind, in the crowd—crowd?—among billions; to become a needle in that proverbial haystack—but a needle someone is searching for—that's what exile is all about. Lay aside your vanity, it says, you are but a grain of sand in the desert. Measure yourself not against your pen-pals but against human infinity: it is about as bad as the inhuman one. Out of that you should speak, not out of your envy or ambition.

Needless to say, this call goes unheeded. Somehow a commentator on life prefers his position to his subject and, when in exile, considers it grim enough not to aggravate it any further. As for such appeals, he considers them inappropriate. He may be right, although calls for humility are always timely. For the other truth of the matter is that exile is a metaphysical condition. At least, it has a very strong, very clear metaphysical condition; to ignore or to dodge it is to cheat yourself out of the meaning of what has happened to you, to doom yourself into remaining forever at the receiving end of things, to ossify into an uncomprehending victim.

It is because of the absence of good examples that one cannot describe an alternative conduct (although Czesław Miłosz and Robert Musil come to mind). Maybe just as well, because we are here evidently to talk about the reality of exile, not about its potential. And the reality of it consists of an exiled writer constantly fighting and conspiring to restore his significance, his leading role, his authority. His main consideration, of course, is the folks back home; but he also wants to rule the roost in the malicious village of his fellow émigrés. Playing ostrich to the metaphysics of his situation, he concentrates on the immediate and tangible. This means besmirching colleagues in a similar predicament, bilious polemics with rival publications, innumerable interviews for the BBC, Deutsche Welle, ORTF [French Radio-Television] and The Voice of America, open letters, statements for the press, going to conferences—you name it. The energy previously spent in food lines or petty officials' musty anterooms is now released and gone rampant. Unchecked by anyone, let alone his kin (for he is himself now a Caesar's wife, as it were, and beyond suspicion—how could his maybe-even-literate-but-aging spouse correct or contradict her certified martyr?), his ego grows rapidly in diameter and eventually, filled with CO₂, lifts him from reality—especially if he resides in Paris, where the Mongolfiere brothers set the precedent.

Traveling by balloon is precipitous and, above all, unpredictable: too easily one becomes a plaything of the winds, in this case, political winds. Small wonder then that our navigator keenly listens to all the forecasts, and on occasion ventures to predict the weather himself. That is, not the weather of wherever he starts or finds himself en route, but the weather at his destination, for our balloonist is invariably homeward bound.

And perhaps the third truth of the matter is that a writer in exile is, by and large, a retrospective and retroactive being. In other words, retrospection plays an excessive (compared with other people's lives) role in his existence, overshadowing his reality and dimming the future into something thicker than its usual pea soup. Like the false prophets of Dante's *Inferno*, his head is forever turned backward and his tears, or saliva, are running down between his shoulder blades. Whether or not he is of elegiac disposition by nature is beside the point: doomed to a limited audience abroad, he cannot help pining for the multitudes, real or imagined, left behind. Just as the former fill him with venom, the latter fuel his fantasy. Even having gained the freedom to travel, even having actually done some traveling, he will stick in his writing to the familiar material of his past, producing, as it were, sequels to his previous works. Approached on this subject, an exiled writer will most likely evoke Ovid's Rome, Dante's Florence, and—after a small pause—Joyce's Dublin.

Indeed, we've got a pedigree, and a much longer one than that. If we want, we can trace it all the way back to Adam. And yet we should be careful about the place it tends to occupy in the public's and our own minds. We all know what happens to many a noble family over generations, or in the course of a revolution. Family trees never make or obscure the forest; and the forest is now advancing. I am mixing metaphors here, but perhaps I can justify this by remarking that to expect for ourselves the kind of future that we constitute for the above-mentioned few is imprudent rather than immodest. Of course a writer always takes himself posthumously: and an exiled writer especially so, inspired as he is not so much by the artificial oblivion to which he is subjected by his former state, but by the way the critical profession in the free marketplace enthuses about his contemporaries. Yet one should go carefully about this type of self-estrangement, not for any other reason than a realization that, with the population explosion, literature, too, has taken on the dimensions of a demographic phenomenon. Per reader, there are simply too many writers around today. A couple of decades ago a grown man thinking about books or authors yet to be read would come up with thirty or forty names; nowadays these names will run in the thousands. Today one walks into a bookstore the way one enters a record shop. To listen to all these groups and soloists would be to overshoot

a lifetime. And very few among those thousands are exiles, or even particularly good. But the public will read them, and not you, for all your halo, not because it is perverse or misguided, but because statistically it is on the side of normalcy and trash. In other words, it wants to read about itself. On any street of any city in the world at any time of night or day there are more people who haven't heard of you than those who have.

The current interest in the literature of exiles has to do, of course, with the rise of tyrannies. Herein perhaps lies our chance with the future reader, though that's the kind of insurance one would like to do without. Partly because of this noble caveat, but mainly because he can't think of the future in any other than the glowing terms of his triumphant return, an exiled writer sticks to his guns. But then why shouldn't he? Why should he try to use anything else, why should he bother probing the future in any other fashion, since it is unpredictable anyhow? The good old stuff served him well at least once: it earned him exile. And exile, after all, is a kind of success. Why not try another tack? Why not push the good old stuff around a bit more? Apart from anything else, it now constitutes ethnographic material, and that goes big with your Western, Northern, or (if you run afoul of a right-wing tyranny) even Eastern publisher. And there is always the chance of a masterpiece in covering the same turf twice, which possibility doesn't escape the eye of your publisher, either, or at least it may provide future scholars with the notion of a "myth-making" element in your work.

But however practical sounding, these factors are secondary or tertiary among those that keep an exiled writer's eyes firmly trained on his past. The main explanation lies in the aforementioned retrospective machinery that gets unwittingly triggered within an individual by the least evidence of his surroundings' strangeness. Sometimes the shape of a maple leaf is enough, and each tree has thousands of these. On an animal level, this retrospective machinery is constantly in motion in an exiled writer, nearly always unbeknownst to him. Whether pleasant or dismal, the past is always a safe territory, if only because it is already experienced, and the species' capacity to revert, to run backward—especially in its thoughts or dreams, since there we are safe as well—is extremely strong in all of us, quite irrespective of the reality we are facing. Yet this machinery has been built into us,

not for cherishing or grasping the past (in the end, we don't do either), but more for delaying the arrival of the present—for, in other words, slowing down a bit the passage of time. See the fatal exclamation of Goethe's Faust.

And the whole point about our exiled writer is that he, too, like Goethe's Faust, clings to his "fair," or not so fair, "moment," not for beholding it, but for postponement of the next one. It's not that he wants to be young again; he simply doesn't want tomorrow to arrive, because he knows that it may edit what he beholds. And the more tomorrow presses him, the more obstinate he becomes. There is terrific value in this obstinacy: with luck, it may amount to intensity of concentration and then, indeed, we may get a great work of literature (the reading public and the publishers sense that, and this is why—as I've already said—they keep an eye on the literature of exiles).

More often, however, this obstinacy translates itself into the repetitiveness of nostalgia, which is, to put it bluntly, simply a failure to deal with the realities of the present or uncertainties of the future.

One can, of course, help matters somewhat by changing one's narrative manner, by making it more avant-garde, by spicing the stuff with a good measure of eroticism, violence, foul language, etc., after the fashion of our free-market colleagues. But stylistic shifts and innovations greatly depend on the condition of the literary idiom "back there," at home, the links with which have not been severed. As for the spice, a writer, exiled or not, never wants to appear to be influenced by his contemporaries. Perhaps an additional truth about the matter is that exile slows down one's stylistic evolution, that it makes a writer more conservative. Style is not so much the man as the man's nerves, and on the whole exile provides one's nerves with fewer irritants than the motherland does. This condition, it must be added, worries an exiled writer somewhat, not only because he regards existence back home as more genuine than his own (by definition, and with all attendant or imagined consequences for normal literary process), but because in his mind there exists a suspicion of a pendulum-like dependency, or ratio, between those irritants and his mother tongue.

One ends up in exile for a variety of reasons and under a number of circumstances. Some of them sound better, some worse, but the

difference has already ceased to matter by the time one reads an obituary. On the bookshelf your place will be occupied, not by you, but by your book. And as long as they insist on making a distinction between art and life, it is better if they find your book good and your life foul than the other way around. Chances are, of course, that they won't care for either.

Life in exile, abroad, in a foreign element, is essentially a premonition of your own book-form fate, of being lost on the shelf among those with whom all you have in common is the first letter of your surname. Here you are, in some gigantic library's reading room, still open. . . . Your reader won't give a damn about how you got here. To keep yourself from getting closed and shelved you've got to tell your reader, who thinks he knows it all, about something qualitatively novel—about his world and himself. If this sounds a bit too suggestive, so be it, because suggestion is the name of the whole game anyhow, and because the distance exile puts between an author and his protagonists indeed sometimes begs for the use of astronomical or ecclesiastical figures.

This is what makes one think that "exile" is, perhaps, not the most apt term to describe the condition of a writer forced (by the state, by fear, by poverty, by boredom) to abandon his country. "Exile" covers, at best, the very moment of departure, of expulsion; what follows is both too comfortable and too autonomous to be called by this name, which so strongly suggests a comprehensible grief. The very fact of our gathering here indicates that, if we indeed have a common denominator, it lacks a name. Are we suffering the same degree of despair, ladies and gentlemen? Are we equally sundered from our public? Do we all reside in Paris? No, but what binds us is our book-like fate, the same literal and symbolic lying open on the table or the floor of the gigantic library, at various ends, to be trampled on or picked up by a mildly curious reader or—worse—by a dutiful librarian. The qualitatively novel stuff we may tell that reader about is the autonomous, spacecraft-like mentality that visits, I am sure, every one of us, but whose visitations most of our pages choose not to acknowledge.

We do this for practical reasons, as it were, or genre considerations. Because this way lies either madness or the degree of coldness associated more with the pale-faced locals than with a hot-blooded

exile. The other way, however, lies—and close too—banality. All of this may sound to you like a typically Russian job of issuing guidelines for literature, while, in fact, it's simply one man's reactions to finding many an exiled author—Russian ones in the first place—on the banal side of virtue. That's a great waste, because one more truth about the condition we call exile is that it accelerates tremendously one's otherwise professional flight—or drift—into isolation, into an absolute perspective: into the condition at which all one is left with is oneself and one's language, with nobody or nothing in between. Exile brings you overnight where it would normally take a lifetime to go. If this sounds to you like a commercial, so be it, because it is about time to sell this idea. Because I indeed wish it got more takers. Perhaps a metaphor will help: to be an exiled writer is like being a dog or a man hurled into outer space in a capsule (more like a dog, of course, than a man, because they will never retrieve you). And your capsule is your language. To finish the metaphor off, it must be added that before long the capsule's passenger discovers that it gravitates not earthward but outward.

For one in our profession the condition we call exile is, first of all, a linguistic event: he is thrust, he retreats into his mother tongue. From being his, so to speak, sword, it turns into his shield, into his capsule. What started as a private, intimate affair with the language, in exile becomes fate—even before it becomes an obsession or a duty. A living language, by definition, has a centrifugal propensity—and propulsion; it tries to cover as much ground as possible—and as much emptiness as possible. Hence the population explosion, and hence your autonomous passage outward, into the domain of a tele-scope or a prayer.

In a manner of speaking, we all work for a dictionary. Because literature is a dictionary, a compendium of meanings for this or that human lot, for this or that experience. It is a dictionary of the language in which life speaks to man. Its function is to save the next man, a new arrival, from falling into an old trap, or to help him realize, should he fall into that trap anyway, that he has been hit by a tautology. This way he will be less impressed—and in a way, more free. For to know the meaning of life's terms, of what is happening to you, is liberating. It would seem to me that the condition we call exile is up for a fuller explication; that, famous for its pain, it should

also be known for its pain-dulling infinity, for its forgetfulness, detachment, indifference, for its terrifying human and inhuman vistas for which we've got no yardstick except ourselves.

We must make it easier for the next man, if we can't make it safer. And the only way to make it easier for him, to make him less frightened of it, is to give him the whole measure of it—that is, as much as we ourselves can manage to cover. We may argue about our responsibilities and loyalties (toward our respective contemporaries, motherlands, otherlands, cultures, traditions, etc.) ad infinitum, but this responsibility or rather, opportunity to set the next man—however theoretical he and his needs may be—a bit more free shouldn't become a subject for hesitation. If all this sounds a bit too lofty and humanistic, then I apologize. These distinctions are actually not so much humanistic as deterministic, although one shouldn't bother with such subtleties. All I am trying to say is that, given an opportunity, in the great causal chain of things, we may as well stop being just its rattling effects and try to play causes. The condition we call exile is exactly that kind of opportunity.

Yet if we don't use it, if we decide to remain effects and play exile in an old-fashioned way, that shouldn't be explained away as nostalgia. Of course it has to do with the necessity of telling about oppression, and of course our condition should serve as a warning to any thinking man toying with the idea of an ideal society. That's our value for the free world. That's our function.

But perhaps our greater value and greater function are to be unwriting embodiments of the disheartening idea that a freed man is not a free man, that liberation is just the means of attaining freedom and is not synonymous with it. This highlights the extent of the damage that can be done to the species, and we can feel proud of playing this role. However, if we want to play a bigger role, the role of a free man, then we should be capable of accepting—or at least imitating—the manner in which a free man fails. A free man, when he fails, blames nobody.

Jiri Guša I propose that we not discuss this paper. It is very unusual to discuss a paper when the author is not present. We have other papers, by writers who are present, such as Karpinski or Venclouva. We can all read Brodsky's paper, but I am opposed to discussing it here.